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A Thematic Study of John Keats's Poetry**Dr. S. N. Kadam**Head, Dept. of English
ACS College, Gangakhed, Dist. Parbhani

John Keats (1798-1821), a poet of love, nature and passion attempted when he was just above eighteen. Right from his early childhood, he started to use his poetic talent. However, he never tried to know that the talents of a poet were there in him. It was Cowden Clarke, his school mate, who introduced him to Spenser, the poets' poet. Keats got the first volume of the 'Fairie Queene' and romped through it like, 'a young horse turned into a spring meadow'. Further, he came in contact with Hunt, a well-known poet of his time. The friendship of Hunt proved useful. He came in contact with Clarke and read the 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey' of Homer translated by Chapman. The effect was immediate and he composed his famous sonnet 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'.

His first collection of poems was published in 1817. It contained 'Sleep and Poetry' and 'I Stood Tip-toe'. 'Sleep and Poetry' was his first serious attempt to explain his ambition. He determined to pass through the kingdom of Flora and Pan and come to 'the agonies the strife of human hearts'. 'I Stood Tip-toe' is rich in the beauty of nature, classical allusions and sensuousness. As we know that John Keats was a pure poet, hence as a pure poet, his poetry is replete with multi-dimensional themes. He belongs to the romantic mood of poetry. He is concerned with romantic themes. He does not go for any worldly or material consideration. The passion for Beauty with him was the master passion. He wrote to his brothers Tom and George Keats on 21 December 1817. Beauty and Love became the major themes in the poetry of Keats.

The romantic poets were great lovers of nature. They had their individual approach to Nature. Mark the words, "Wordsworth spiritualized Nature, Shelly intellectualized her, Coleridge linked Nature to the supernatural but Keats is content to render Nature through the senses." (1)

Coleridge's poetry has supernatural elements, melancholy, love, beauty, and love with nature. The romantic poets have a lot of the supernatural. Supernatural is that which exists outside the normal experience or knowledge of man. His poems Christabel 'Rime of Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan' have a rich element of the supernatural. Keats uses the supernatural in several of his poems.

Keats is fully alive to the supernatural world. He introduces an element of magic, mystery, ghosts, and fairies in his poems – 'The Eve of St. Agnes, La Belle Dame Sans Merci and Lamia. In 'La Belle', we have a cruel fairy that enralls a knight-at-arms. In 'Lamia' we have a serpent-woman. 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is based on a medieval superstition and so is 'The Eve of St. Mark'. The world of the unseen lands a strange charm and beauty to the poems of Keats.

The romantic poets are dissatisfied with the present. The reality around them is a painful affair. Keats saw much weariness, fever and frets about him. He wants to escape into the world of beauty and romance. He found such a world in the ancient world of Hellas, the Golden Age of Greece. Greek myths, art, literature and culture fascinated him. Homer and his works were a great delight to him. He captured the very spirit of Greek and made his characters in 'Hyperion' speak like the Greek ones. In 'Edymion', he looks a Greek story and gave it a shape of his own liking. He wandered with the Greek gods and

Goddesses so much that he became a Greek, as P.B Shelly pointed out in one poem after the other, he returns to the medieval themes, particularly in 'The Eve of St. Agnes' and 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci':

*"I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long;
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A fairy's song." (2)*

In his 'Ode to a Nightingale' he is brought back to the world of reality by the very world 'forlorn' which is like a bell to toll him back from the happy world of the bird to his solitary self. 'La Belle' tells a painful story as do 'Isabella' and 'Lamia'. His melancholy goes with joy and beauty, as mentioned in his 'Ode on Melancholy':

*"She dwells with Beauty-that must die;
And joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu;....." (3)*

Keats uses different stanza-forms and metrical devices in his poetic compositions. In certain poems he uses blank verse with great efficacy and charm. The stanza-structures differ from poem to poem. 'Endymion' is written in rhymed couplets, 'Hyperion' in blank verse. All his great Odes are in stanza-forms but the structure varies. He wrote some of the best sonnets like 'On first Looking into Chapman's Homer' and 'When I have Fears and Bright Star'. He is one of the great sonneteers in English Literature.

His poetic style is equally romantic. There is a classical finish about his diction but the treatment is romantic. He is fond of fine phrases and presents beautiful pictures through words. The pictures are visual and you more than see, you feel them. Thus in 'To Autumn', you can see the rich farmer, the reaper:

*"And Sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours." (4)*

When we think of Keats, 'Beauty' comes to our mind. Keats and Beauty have become almost synonymous. We cannot think of Keats without thinking of Beauty. Beauty is an abstraction; it does not give out its meaning easily. For Keats, it is not so. He sees Beauty everywhere just as a mystic sees the vision of God everywhere. Keats made Beauty his project of wonder and admiration and he became the greatest poet of Beauty. All the Romantic poets had a passion for one thing or the other. Wordsworth was the worshipper of Nature and Coleridge was a poet of the supernatural. Shelly stood for ideals and Byron loved liberty. 'With Keats the passion for Beauty was the greatest, rather than only consideration'.

In the letters of Keats, we frequently read about his own ideas about Beauty. In one of his letters to George and Tom, he wrote that "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all other consideration." The poet thinks only of Beauty and nothing but Beauty. To his friend Richard Woodhouse, Keats wrote, "I feel assured I should write from the mere yearning and fondness I have for the Beautiful even if my might's labours should be burnt every morning and no eye ever shine upon them." (5)

It was in reaction to certain unhealthy comments on his poems. It shows his determination to write as he had the yearning passion for the Beautiful. To his own beloved Fanny Brawne, he explained his notion of Beauty- "If I should die, I have left no immoral work to make my friends proud of my memory- but I have loved the principle of Beauty in all things and if I had time I would have made myself remembered." (6)

Commenting on these lines, Matthew Arnold observed that he has made himself remembered, and remembered as no merely sensuous poet could be: and he has done it by having 'loved the principle of beauty in all things. Beauty appeared to him in various forms and shapes- in the flowers and in the clouds, in the hills and rills, in the song of a bird and in the face of a woman, in a great book and in the legends of old. Beauty was there in the pieces of stone with carving thereon. The opening lines of his poem 'Endymion' have become very popular with his readers:

*"A things of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness, but will still keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing." (7)*

Let us talk of his five senses. His five senses worked, sometimes individually and sometimes collectively to appreciate Beauty. He listens to the song of the nightingale and he is transported to a land of beauty where dwell no sorrow and suffering. In the embalmed darkness of thick forests, he enjoys the sweet fragrance of many a flower:

*"I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild." (8)*

In his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', we can see how his sense of hearing picks up Beauty in the most musical way.

*"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone." (9)*

Whosoever sees the piper piping songs without any voice will hear the voice of his own heart and soul. When we talk of his poem, 'Ode to Autumn', we find that Keats sees pictures of beauty and wonder in it. In his letter to Reynolds, he wrote, "How beautiful the season is now – How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather – Sian skies – I never liked stubble fields so much as now - Aye better than the chilly green of the spring." (10)

He naturally came out with the popular 'Ode to Autumn': It has beautiful sights and sounds, richer than those of spring-

*"Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whosoever seeks abroad may find*

*Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers,
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cider-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozing hours by hours.” (11)*

Hence, John Keats loved the mighty abstract idea of Beauty in all things. He noted that the principle of beauty operated everywhere. For him, Beauty was an overriding consideration. All other considerations were merge into it, or were obliterated by it. He will ever be remembered and read as a poet of Beauty.

John Keats is also known as a great ode writer. He attempted various forms of poetical compositions as sonnets and lyrics, and wrote some longer poems also but he found his true genius in odes. Critic after critic has praised Keats for his odes. There are two main traditions of odes – the Pindaric odes and the Horation odes. Keats introduced changes in the manner and matter of the ode. He introduced new themes in his odes. All the odes of Keats relate to his personal life but the treatment makes the personal universal. His odes are also rich in philosophies content. He writes because there is an urge in his soul; he writes because he has felt and thought and his feelings and thoughts must come out.

The favorite themes in Keats romanticism are set in the odes in short and elaborate forms, constructed with harmonious skill. When Keats was writing his odes, the misery of the world was too much with him. His younger brother Tom had died in his arms, his second brother George had left for America and his own love was not very promising.

Keats loved fine phrases wherever he got them. He went to Spenser and to Shakespeare and there he noted how the two masters used language for a pictorial suggestion. At the same time, it was the meaningfulness of the masters that appealed to him. He came to have the same quality in his diction. The use of Greek myths and legends and other allusion lend an extra grace to his vocabulary and poetic suggestions. He uses a variety of verse-forms and adds a lot of music to every form. He uses heroic couplet, four line-stanzas. His words have a magic effect. As we know that a pure poet writes because he is delighted with his act of writing. Sometimes, he is indifferent to his readers with his act of writing. It is practically, impossible to say when he is indifferent to his readers and when the readers sit with him. Keats was delighted with his work and so were his brothers and sisters and friends though the beloved was not. He did not get readership in his day but soon his words found a path through the heart of mankind. Now the world cannot forget him as he wrote for the world. He presented Love – love fulfilled and love unfulfilled. He presented pictures of beauty; he gave voice to the aspirations of mankind and probed the agony and strife of the human heart.

Thus, we can say that Keats’s idea of beauty is a very comprehensive one. It is not confined to what seems good or pleasant or beautiful: It goes beyond these boundaries even to the most painful and unpleasant aspects of life. A true poet sees life as a whole. A true poet enjoys light and shade, foul and fair, high and low with the same delight. So, an important aspect of his concept of Beauty is to put Joy

and Sorrow to together. Joy and Sorrow and Melancholy and Happiness cannot be seen in isolation. There is no fear that does not promise hope. There is a close relationship between Joy and Sorrow.

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